



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

REGION 4

ATLANTA FEDERAL CENTER
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ATLANTA, GEORGIA 30303-8960

July 8, 2009

Mr. Claiborne Barnwell
MS Dept of Transportation
Environmental/Location Division
P.O. Box 1850
Jackson, Ms 39215-1850

**SUBJECT: EPA Review of the Greenville Connector
Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS)
From Relocated US 82 to the Proposed I-69 Corridor South of Benoit, MS
Greenville, MS Washington and Bolivar Counties, MS;
CEQ#: 20090123, ERP#: FHW-FHW-E40824-MS**

Dear Mr. Barnwell:

Pursuant to Section 309 of the Clean Air Act and Section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), EPA Region 4 has evaluated the consequences of constructing a 21-mile four-lane interstate highway From Relocated US 82 to the Proposed I-69 Corridor south of Benoit. The purpose of this proposed highway system is to provide a new interstate-level connector between US 82, the City of Greenville, and the proposed Interstate 69 to improve intermodal connectivity and stimulate economic development.

The DEIS initially examines the no build alternative and eight build alternative. These alternatives were evaluated and reduced to two build alternatives for detailed analysis (CA and CB). Based on this assessment, the DEIS identified Alternative CB as the environmentally preferred alternative.

The DEIS indicates that the preferred alternative may impact 1,950 acres of new right-of-way, 64.9 acres of wetlands, 17,855 linear feet of streams (27 stream crossings), 498 acres within the 100-year floodplain, 17 noise sensitive sites, 778 acres of prime and unique farmland, 10 residential and business relocations, and 2 hazardous materials sites. Consequently, EPA primarily has concerns regarding wetland, stream, floodplain and noise impacts.

Wetland and stream impacts are discussed in the DEIS. The wetlands in the project area are primarily forested and both build alternatives have relatively similar wetland aquatic resource impacts (CB 64.9 acres and CA 69.3 acres). In addition, there are significant acres of prior converted wetlands that could be impacted or converted from agricultural use by this project and consequently could require a permit under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act.

Based on the DEIS, it appears that MDOT delineated potential wetlands occurring along each proposed alternate. However, the jurisdictional determination by the Army Corps of Engineers has not been complete and is not included in the DEIS. This determination should preferably be incorporated in NEPA document at the DEIS stage, but no later than the FEIS.

EPA notes that efforts were made to characterize the wetland resources in terms of the overall location, type and size. However, the DEIS main document does not adequately discuss the functional values of the wetlands that may be impacted. The DEIS should discuss specific avoidance (i.e. alignment shifts) and minimizations efforts (i.e. bridging, roadway narrowing at water crossings) that have been or will be made along the preferred alignment. EPA has concerns regarding impacts to all wetlands and streams, but especially those with good to fair functional values. Avoiding impacts to forested wetlands is also a major concern, since they are extremely hard to successfully replicate.

According to the DEIS, wetland mitigation is currently being proposed at Dahomy National Wildlife Refuge or O'Keefe Wildlife Management Area. However, no functional assessment has been conducted related to stream impacts and no location is currently being proposed for stream mitigation. Information regarding stream function and mitigation should be incorporated in the FEIS. The FEIS should include a draft mitigation plan to compensate for predicted wetland and stream losses that remain following efforts to avoid and minimize such impacts. In an effort to both streamline the project and provide adequate disclosure regarding proposed mitigation of project impacts, the FEIS should identify the type and amount of mitigation that will be proposed to aquatic resource impacts.

The DEIS indicates that the project will be designed to ensure that there is no rise in the 100-year floodplain or impact base flood elevations. While FEMA regulations do not address no-rise within the watershed, EPA would like MDOT to calculate the amount of flood storage that will potentially be lost by the proposed project. Every effort (i.e. reducing the right-of-way width, bridging) should be made to reduce potential flood risks close to populated areas. These specific efforts or commitments should be discussed in the summary of the FEIS.

The proposed Greenville Connector will result in 778 acres of prime and unique farmland loss. Based upon MDOT's environmental analysis of applicable County Soil surveys, there are potentially prime farmland soils located within the project study area. MDOT consulted with Natural Resource Conservation Service and completed form AD-1006 (See Appendix). Based upon the Land Evaluation and Site Assessment (LESA) criteria, it appears that the farmlands within the project alternatives received a score of 160 points or less. Therefore, the proposed project should not have an effect on prime farmlands as defined under 7 CFR Section 658.2. The requirement for additional environmental analysis to prime farmlands, unique farmlands or farmlands of statewide or local importance is not needed under existing federal and state laws and regulations. In addition, the section entitled "farmland mitigation" should be changed to "farmland compensation" because it is not really possible to mitigate for farmland losses.

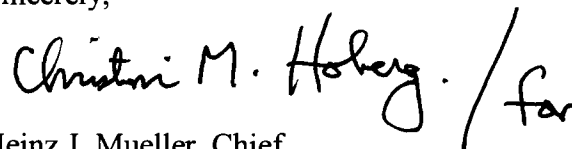
Seventeen noise sensitive receptors which would experience a substantial increase of 15 dBA or greater are identified along the preferred alternative CB. However, no mitigation was found to be reasonable and feasible in the study (i.e. noise wall or other noise mitigation measures). The FEIS should provide additional information that explains why noise abatement measures are not reasonable or feasible. EPA hopes that more not less mitigation would be considered as the project proceeds and final designs are drafted. In addition, the DEIS discussion does not include enough information from the noise study. The amount of substantial increase in noise as a result of the project and the total noise levels to be experienced by the sensitive receptors should be presented in the FEIS.

The project summary should include a table of proposed minimization and mitigation commitments associated with the proposed project impacts. Minimization and mitigation commitments should be included that address issues of storm water management, wetland, stream and flood storage loss. These commitments should also identify the phase of the project in which the commitments will be fulfilled.

Based on our review of the DEIS, EPA assigned a rating of EC (Environmental Concerns) to the document. Our review has identified environmental impacts requiring additional consideration and necessary avoidance, minimization, and mitigation measures for wetland, stream and flood storage loss, noise impacts and land-use changes. The document quality is rated "2" meaning there is need for clarification and additional information to fully assess the proposed project. EPA recommends that the FEIS include commitments to bridge or narrow the ROW width, wherever possible, over major floodplain, river, stream and drainage canal crossings including those associated with Mississippi's impaired waterbodies, Deer Creek or its headwaters and Fish Lake.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this proposed action. We look forward to working with FHWA and MDOT on this project. If we can be of further assistance, please contact Ntale Kajumba at (404) 562-9620 or kajumba.ntale@epa.gov.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Christine M. Hoberg, followed by a forward slash and the word "for" in cursive.

Heinz J. Mueller, Chief
NEPA Program Office
Office of Policy and Management